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Re-integration programs help Guardsmen returning from deployment

CAMP ATTERBURY, Ind.—Returning from an overseas deployment is an exciting time for most Soldiers, but it's also a time that ushers in significant change and uncertainty for some. To help Soldiers re-integrate into civilian life in the United States, the Alaska National Guard Family Programs office is helping to educate Guardsmen on the resources available now that they are back from deployment.

One-hundred and eight Soldiers from the Alaska Army National Guard returned to the United States Nov. 8 after a yearlong deployment to Afghanistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. The Soldiers conducted security forces missions, providing security in potentially dangerous areas to Provincial Reconstruction Teams who are helping to re-build Afghanistan.

While the majority of Soldiers return from combat missions without any visible injuries or ailments, often times, the psychological impact from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and problems associated from Traumatic Brain Injuries may not surface until after the official de-mobilization process.

Mirta Adams, Transition Assistance coordinator for the Alaska National Guard, said that one of the most important things Soldiers need to remember in order to get help is to be honest about issues they are having; sleeplessness, nightmares, aggression and excessive drinking are just a few symptoms of PTSD and TBI, and there are things that spouses, parents, family and friends can do to help.

"One of the things we find is that Soldiers will hide their problems for several different reasons," Adams said. "Some of the reasons they do this are fear of having a stigma attached to them, being discharged from service, or not being able to re-enlist, so, many of them hide their ailments, which makes it very hard on their families and puts unnecessary strains on them."

To combat these issues, the Alaska National Guard has put in place different programs and resources for the Soldiers and their families.

The first is the Yellow Ribbon Re-integration Program which consolidates recently deployed units at 30-, 60-, and 90-day intervals. The reason for this is that typically, these are the time periods in which many problems begin to surface, although for some it may take years for problems to arise.

"National Guard and Reserve Soldiers are obligated to the Yellow Ribbon Program at 30, 60 and 90 days after returning from deployment," Adams said. "During the consolidations, they are allowed to bring up to two family members with them, and they learn different ways to deal with some of the issues like Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or Traumatic Brain Injury that may have come up following deployment."

A stressor unique to Guard and Reserve Soldiers is job placement following a deployment, while active-duty Soldiers and Active Guard Reserve Soldiers come back to waiting jobs, often times traditional Guard and Reserve Soldiers lose their income once they return home. In order to address that, a program called Hero to Hire has been implemented to assist Soldiers in finding work.

Because of the remoteness of many of the villages in Alaska, Adams said that another unique concern is isolation.

"What a lot of people don't understand, as one of the challenges, is the remoteness of many of the villages the Soldiers will be returning to, and we are taking that into account with the kind of re-integration programs we are initiating," Adams said.

"We have initiated a program we are calling the 'Warrior Support Circle,' a program that will allow the Soldiers from that area to choose five people as their circle of concern who they will allow to come up to them and say, 'Hey, I see you are having a hard time, let's see how we can help you,'" explained Adams. "We hope that by encouraging openness and a judgment-free environment, Soldiers will be more likely to ask for and accept help if they need it."

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